

SUNDAY 24 (A) (2020)

A) INTRODUCTION: LINCOLN'S LETTER

- Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of the United States, was elected to office on an antislavery ticket, an election that precipitated the Civil War.
- Lincoln's secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, had some trouble with a major general who accused him, in abusive terms, of favouritism.
- Stanton complained to Lincoln, who suggested that he write the officer a sharp letter.
- Stanton did so, and showed the strongly worded statement to the president, who applauded its powerful language.
- "What are you going to do with it?" he asked.
- Surprised at the question, Stanton said: "Send it, of course."
- Lincoln shook his head.
- "You don't want to send that letter," he said. "Put it in the stove. That's what I do when I've written a letter when I am angry.
- It's a good letter and you had a good time writing it and feel better. Now, burn it and write another."

B) FORGIVENESS OF GOD

- Forgiveness is at the heart of our faith as Christians, or at least it should be, because forgiveness is at the heart of the God we worship.
- In his life on earth, Jesus made visible the forgiveness, the compassion, the mercy of God.
- He talked about it: he told vivid stories to illustrate the mercy of the Father, the best known being the story of the Prodigal Son.
- He also made God's forgiveness visible by forgiving sinners: the woman caught in adultery, the paralysed man, the Good Thief.
- Above all, Jesus revealed his own readiness to forgive those who had trespassed against him.
- He forgave Peter for denying him; he forgave the disciples for abandoning him during his passion; and he forgave those who were putting him to death: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

C) FORGIVENESS IN JESUS' DISCIPLES

- So it is hardly surprising that Jesus should expect his followers, in their own way, to embody or make visible the mercy and forgiveness of God.
- In the Our Father, Jesus puts a kind of condition on God's forgiveness of us when he says: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."
- And in today's Gospel the same lesson is made only too clear: Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive another, and the answer Jesus gives is very simple - every time!
- Simple, but often very difficult to put into practice.

C) DIFFICULT TO FORGIVE

- Even when we really want to forgive another, when we have prayed for the grace of forgiveness, when we have had it out with the other person and have accepted their apology, it seems so difficult to put the matter out of our minds.
- We forgive, but we cannot forget: the hurt or offence, whether real, or imagined, still rankles.
- Today's First Reading speaks of "anger and resentment, these are foul things and both are found with the sinner."
- When we are offended, whether the offence is real or imaginary, we do feel angry and resentful and bitter.
- Those are natural feelings to have; we should feel angry if some injustice has been committed against us.
- It would be very strange if we didn't
- The only trouble is that unless we deal with those feelings promptly, they can become engrained in us;
- they can become more and more difficult to get rid of;
- and of course they are doing no-one any good, least of all ourselves
- So how can we deal with those feelings of anger in a healthy way?

D) WRITING A LETTER

- One way is to do what Abraham Lincoln suggested to his friend:
- We sit down and write a letter to the person who has offended us.
- We write exactly what we want to say, we say how we feel, we tell them what we really think of them, we hold nothing back.
- And we work away at the letter until we are completely satisfied with it.
- And then, of course, we burn it or shred it.
- We never send it.
- After that, we might seek the advice of a wise friend, who may help us to see what action if any should be taken.
- And we can bring the whole matter to God in prayer, asking him for the spirit of forgiveness and the spirit of wisdom.
- Whether or not a reconciliation in real-life is possible, at least we have taken positive steps to recognise and deal with the feelings of anger and resentment within ourselves,
- and which so easily prevent us from forgiving our brother or our sister from our heart.

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